

ORM NEWS

From the Office of the
Deputy Assistant Secretary for
Resolution Management
Department of Veterans Affairs



October 2004

From the Deputy Assistant Secretary



ORM Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Program

I recently released memorandums to all ORM employees reaffirming my commitment and support of ORM's Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) policy and announcing that ORM's ADR Program has been updated.

The ADR policy encourages the use of mediation to resolve workplace disputes and our ADR Program provides a resource to be used to resolve disputes in a timely and cost efficient manner.

My aim is to prevent disputes when possible, resolve them when appropriate, and to foster an environment that not only encourages the use of ADR through mediation but views the use of ADR as a way of doing business.

One of my goals is to maintain a workplace environment where employees feel valued and can be productive, innovative, and take pride in contributing to our Nation's veterans. I believe that our commitment to the use of ADR to resolve workplace disputes and to the establishment of an effective ORM ADR program helps us achieve this goal.

James S. Jones

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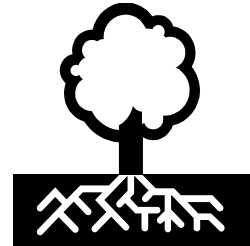
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Program Highlights

REVISED ROOT CAUSE CATEGORIES

Office of Policy and Compliance

In early fall 2004, the Office of Policy and Compliance (OPC) conducted a root cause survey that was disseminated to all ORM EEO Counselors to determine the degree of difficulty they might be experiencing in selecting one of the previously identified root cause categories. The results of the survey revealed that, consistently, there was a great deal of difficulty identifying an appropriate root cause category using the existing root cause categories.



OPC, in conjunction with the National Center for Organizational Development (NCOD), developed a plan to visit each ORM field office to meet with EEO counselors to discuss the various cases they review to determine how the root cause categories could be improved. The feedback provided assisted OPC in the development of new root cause categories that are easier to understand and are user-friendly.

As a result of our discussions, we have revised these definitions and initiated training, beginning September 8, 2004 (see *Root Cause Training in the September 2004 edition of ORM News*), at each regional office on their use. The revised Root cause categories are:

1. *Interpersonal Conflict: Management Factors* – In the counselor's judgment, one of the factors below substantially contributed to the complainant initiating an EEO complaint.

- a) Lack of Policy/Procedure Knowledge/Enforcement
- b) Policy/Procedure Communication
- c) Diversity Awareness
- d) Managerial/Interpersonal Skills
- e) Unequal Inconsistent Application of Rules
- f) Work Ethics
- g) Lack of Supervisory Action

2. *Interpersonal Conflict: Aggrieved Factors* – In the counselor's judgment, one of the factors below substantially contributed to the complainant initiating an EEO complaint.

- a) Lack of Policy/Procedure Knowledge/Adherence to Policy
- b) Aggrieves Interpersonal Skills

- c) Diversity Awareness
- d) Work Ethics
- e) Personal Problems That Spill Into the Workplace

3. *Aggrieved Does Not Understand Criteria Necessary for Filing an EEO Complaint* – The aggrieved does not understand the minimum criteria necessary to substantiate a prima facie case of discrimination (i.e., identifying another individual of another protected class that were treated more favorably).

4. *Third Part Apparently Influenced the Decision to File an EEO Claim* – A third party substantially influences (e.g., through advice, information) the aggrieved's decision to file a complaint when the minimum criteria necessary to substantiate a prima facie case of unlawful discrimination does not appear to be present.

5. *Other Category* – The complaint does not appear to arise from any of the previously listed root causes.

For more information, contact the Office of Policy and Compliance at (202) 501- 2680. ■

Five-level Appraisal System Reminder

VA moved from a pass/fail performance system to a 5-tier performance appraisal system in January 2004. Employees will be rated Outstanding, Excellent, Fully Successful, Minimally Successful, or Unsatisfactory on their 2004 annual performance evaluations.

ORM employees were issued new performance plans in the spring of 2004, provided training by ORM HR, advised of the new system in the February 2004 edition of ORM News along with the availability of on-line information about this process at <http://vaww.va.gov/title5performance>.

Questions concerning the new system can be directed to your manager or ORM HR at (202) 501-2800.

Post-9/11 Backlash Discrimination

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, there have been many incidents of discrimination, including hate crimes, against Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, Sikh Americans, South-Asian Americans, and individuals perceived to be of Middle Eastern origin.

The Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice urges individuals to report incidents of discrimination to the Department of Justice.

Examples of backlash discrimination:

- A transit worker's supervisor makes frequent racial epithets against the worker because his family is from Iran. Last week, the boss put up a fake sign on the bulletin board telling everyone not to trust the worker because he is a terrorist.
- A woman who emigrated from Pakistan applies for a job as an accountant. The employer turns her down because she speaks with an accent even though she is able to perform the job requirements.
- A Sikh man is terminated from his job because he wears a turban and beard in compliance with his religious beliefs and has refused to comply with his employer's request to come to work clean-shaven and without a turban.
- A Muslim employee requests time off at lunch on Fridays for congregational prayers. The employer immediately says "no" without considering whether it could reasonably accommodate the employee's request.

The Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice enforces laws that prohibit discrimination in several areas. These include hate crimes and intimidation and discrimination in employment, education, housing, lending, public accommodations, and voting, among others.

For more information, visit the Department of Justice Web site "Civil Rights and Liberty Violations" at <http://www.usdoj.gov/civilliberties.htm>. ■

Thrift Savings Plan Open Season

The TSP open season begins October 15th and ends December 31, 2004. During the open season, eligible employees may elect to enroll, change or stop their contributions. Also, during the open season, employees covered by FERS may elect to contribute up to 15% of the basic pay they earn each pay period and CSRS employees may elect to contribute up to 10%. The 2005 Internal Revenue Service elective deferral limit is \$14,000.

Employees are encouraged to make changes by using Employee Express (EEX) by visiting the EEX web site at www.employeeexpress.gov <<http://www.employeeexpress.gov/>> or by calling 1-800-414-5272. Employees who are not able to use EEX should contact the HR office at (785) 350-3754 or their local HR liaison to request a hardcopy form (TSP-1).

Catch-up Contributions for 2005

Eligible participants who are age 50 and older or who may turn age 50 during 2005 may elect to contribute up to an additional \$4,000 in 2005.

Catch-up contributions for 2004 will end with the direct deposit employees receive for pay period 25, on December 30, 2004.

Employees will not have the option of using Employee Self-service to elect TSP catch-up contributions. Eligible participants who sign-up for catch-up contributions must contact their local human resource office to complete the form TSP-1-C (Thrift Savings Plan Catch-up Contribution Election).

Additional information regarding TSP can be found by visiting the TSP web site at www.tsp.gov <<http://www.tsp.gov/>> .

Use or Lose Annual Leave

Employees may carry over to the next leave year a maximum amount of accrued annual leave (240 hours for most employees). "Use or lose" annual leave is the amount of accrued annual leave that is in excess of the employee's maximum annual leave limitation for carry over into the next leave year. Employees must "use" their excess annual leave by the end of a leave year or they will "lose" (forfeit) it. An agency may consider restoring annual leave that was forfeited due to an exigency of the public business or sickness of the employee only if the annual leave was scheduled in writing before the start of the third biweekly pay period prior to the end of the leave year or November 27, 2004. The 2004 leave year ends January 8, 2005.

Source – Office of Personnel Management

ORM Veteran's Day Observance

Last year we marked the 50th anniversary observance of Veteran's Day with a special edition of ORM News recognizing ORM employees who served in the armed forces, *ORM Employees Serving Our Nation, Past and Present*.

We would like to do something similar this year. What do you think would be an appropriate way for ORM to honor veterans? Please share your suggestions for activities recognizing ORM employees or other veterans who have served or are serving in the armed forces for their contributions to the Nation. Veterans Day is November 11, 2004. These activities can be local events or a coordinated activity by all ORM offices.

Examples of similar activities are:

- *Operation Lend a Helping Hand*

ORM's headquarters', Mid-Atlantic and ITS staffs have joined VBA's Washington Regional Office in *Operation Lend a Helping Hand* to provide support to the men and women serving in the D.C. National Guard and their families during the upcoming holidays. Employees are asked to donate canned goods and toys beginning October 18, 2004, for distribution during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays to the families of D.C. National Guard members.

- Daniel (Dan) Cuff, Intake Specialist, and Thomas E. Allen, Sr., EEO Counselor, Southeastern Operations, were recently honored with a certificate signed by the Secretary, a proclamation signed by the DAS for ORM and a plaque in recognition of the sacrifices they made when they answered the call to active duty in support of the nation. (ORM News September 2004.)
- With a "Welcome Home" for Vernet Frasher, Office of Policy and Compliance, on his visit to OPC while he was on leave from his active duty service in Kuwait. This included activities organized by his co-workers recognizing him for his service. (ORM News October 2003.)

Suggestions can be sent to Terry Washington via e-mail no later than October 29, 2004.



Office Notes

Great Lakes Operations – [Tywana Halstead](#), Field Manager, [Thurman Story](#), Intake Specialist, [Denene Burnette](#), Lead Investigator, [Ethel Bodiford](#), Investigator/Counselor, [Sondra Oker](#), Counselor, and [Bettye Brown](#), Counselor, conducted EEO training at the Indianapolis VAMC September 21 - 23, 2004. Topics included sexual harassment and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) to an audience of 169 supervisors and 472 employees.

Congratulations to [Bettye Brown](#), EEO Counselor, who was recently recognized for 30 years of government service.

Office of the COO – [Linda Heard](#), Administrative Assistant, received her 25 year government service award on October 26th.

Southeastern Operations – On September 28th and 29th, Bill Low, Southeastern Operations Regional EEO Officer and Linnell Baker, Administrative Officer, Southeastern Operations Region visited the Miami VA Medical Center to participate in the EEO National Training Program for Managers and Supervisors. Mr. Low conducted the training for Module I - Discrimination Complaint Process/ADR Program and Ms. Baker conducted the training on Module III - Prevention of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace. Modules II and IV - Reasonable Accommodation and Communications were conducted by Supervisory Judge Patrick A. Kokenge, EEO, Miami District Field Office and Janice Costa, EEO Program Manager, VAMC Miami. Two hundred employees attended this training including the Medical Center Director, Associate Director and Chief of Staff.

Congratulations [Karen Greene](#) on her promotion to C- 1. Her promotion was effective July 25, 2004. Way to go Karen!!!!

Central Plains Operations – The DAS for ORM received a message from the Director of the Phoenix, AZ VA Regional Office complimenting [Teresa Stein](#) a counselor at our Houston office for the professionalism she demonstrated during her shadowing assignment in Phoenix as part of her participation in VA's Executive Leadership Program.

[Hwa-Soon \(Sue\) Thorson](#), EEO Intake Specialist/Investigator, participated in the *First Annual Federal Career Enhancement Training Workshop* on September 16, 2004, in Albuquerque, NM. This event was sponsored by the Santa Fe Federal Executive Board Federal American Pacific American Council. Sue recruited two talents from the local VA facility to give presentations on "How to build KSAO for Federal Jobs" and "Communications Skills." The workshop was offered to current federal, state, local government employees as well as students from the University of New Mexico. Sue was also one of three panel members for a discussion on interviewing skills. The workshop was well received by the attendees. Sue also volunteers as a mediator for the Albuquerque Metro Court during non-duty hours with a 76 percent resolution rate.

Did You Know?

What is Stress? *Submitted by Lillette Turner, OPC*

Stress is the “wear and tear” our bodies experience as we adjust to our continuously changing environment; it has physical and emotional effects on us and can create positive or negative feelings.

As a positive influence, it can help compel us to action, awareness and exciting new perspectives, which can add excitement to our lives.

As a negative influence, it can relish distrust, rejection, anger, and depression, which can lead to health problems; such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, and stroke.

Life without stimulus would be incredibly dull and boring. Life with too much stimulus becomes unpleasant. Too much stress can seriously interfere with our ability to perform effectively.

There are several major sources of stress:

Survival stress: this may occur in cases where your survival or health is threatened or you are put under pressure.

Internally generated stress: this can come from being anxious worrying about events beyond your control.

Environmental and Job Stress: can come from noise, crowding, untidiness, and constant distractions; rush hour traffic; unrealistic expectations by our boss and of ourselves.

Fatigue and overwork: here stress builds over a long period. This occurs when you try to achieve too much in too little time; or where we are not using effective time management strategies.

Emotional Stress and anxiety make the heart work harder, which can make symptoms worse for those who already have heart problems.

Keys to Effectively Manage Stress

Adjust your attitude and thinking (practice optimism & stop complaining)

Maintain Your Balance (live by what is really important; manage time well)

Develop some form of Spirituality (it promotes good health)

Keep Laughing (Positive impact on your health)

Learn to accept things you cannot change

Look for good in situations instead of bad

Learn to say no

Allow yourself time to get things done

Strengthen Your Resilience (meditate; watch your diet; read material a good book; get plenty of exercise, such as, walking, jogging, golfing and swimming – whatever you like to do)

Time management – reduce stress by managing your workload.

National Disability Employment Awareness Month

VA proudly joins the Nation in celebrating National Disability Employment Awareness Month throughout October. This year's theme is "You're Hired! Success Knows No Limitations!"

Public Law 176, enacted by Congress in 1945, designated the first week in October as "National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week." In 1988, Congress changed the name to "National Disability Employment Awareness Month."

More than 3,789 VA employees (1.93%) have targeted disabilities, many of them veterans. They are an essential part of our workforce and have demonstrated excellence in executive, administrative, managerial, and technical fields. As a Department, we are committed to hiring and promoting persons with disabilities.

[Disability Employment Mentoring Day](#) is held in conjunction with National Disability Employment Awareness Month; it's patterned after mentoring and job-shadow days associated with Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and the annual Groundhog Job Shadow Day. This observance provides people with disabilities an opportunity to gain insight into career options by spending time in the workplace shadowing an employee as s/he experiences a normal day on the job.

For more information contact the Office of Diversity Management.

ORM News is a monthly publication of the Office of Resolution Management. Contact Terry Washington, External Affairs Program, by e-mail or by calling (202) 501-2800 concerning the contents of this newsletter. Copies of this newsletter are available at <http://vaww.va.gov/orm>.